

POLITICS & POLICY

After 25 Years, the Nation Still Remembers The Kennedy Tragedy Dallas Wants to Forget

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DALLAS—Twenty years ago, traveling through Europe as a student, Ruth Miller Fitzgibbons received the same greeting everywhere. She would say she was from Dallas. And her European acquaintances would reply, "Oh, bang bang! You shot Kennedy."

Such history remains stubbornly alive. "When Koreans learn I am from Dallas," wrote a Dallas Morning News sports reporter last month, after covering the Olympics, "they invariably recall Kennedy's assassination. The Cowboys or the 'Dallas' TV show apparently haven't made much of an impression."

Dallas the television show is in decline, as are the pro-football Cowboys. But a quarter of a century after John Fitzgerald Kennedy was gunned down here, Dallas, the city, remains notorious as the assassination site. Tourists from all corners of the world still flock by the thousands to Dealey Plaza, near the intersection of Houston and Main streets, to gaze at the building from which Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly fired his sniper's rifle.

Despite its emergence as the financial capital of the Southwest, its remarkable growth and its eagerness to please an Eastern establishment that is all but scorned by other Texans, Dallas remains identified as the trigger-happy city blamed for the collapse of Camelot.

The result has been a 25-year-old wound to the city's psychic pride, with attendant bitterness over the world's reaction—then and now—and confusion over why the tourists still throng.

The Eyes Upon Texas

As President Kennedy flew into Love Field on Nov. 22, 1963, the Dallas Morning News—then known as a strident, red-baiting daily—ran a full-page, black-bordered ad that accused the charismatic young leader of being soft on Communism and of betraying American allies. The ad was written by three members of the local John Birch Society and paid for by oilman Nelson Bunker Hunt, insurance executive Edgar Crissey and H.R. 'Bum' Bright, whose current interests include banking and a majority ownership of the football Cowboys.

The prominent local businessmen's distaste for Mr. Kennedy mirrored prevailing public opinion in Dallas, the only major Texas city that didn't vote Democratic in 1960. Then, at 1 p.m., the president was dead.

World reaction was bitter, even irrational. Dallas was condemned as "the city of hate." Six months after the slaying, Fortune magazine excoriated the city's "international reputation for violence and hatred and intolerance."

Dallasites interviewed in recent months



John F. Kennedy

by James W. Pennebaker, a Southern Methodist University psychologist, evoked a drumroll of bitter memories from that Thanksgiving season and beyond—being refused service at out-of-state restaurants and gas stations, having children throw rocks at their cars and hearing long-distance operators disconnect their phone calls.

Some who were students from Dallas at out-of-state colleges were hounded by their peers. Christy Bednar, a manager at KERA, the local public television station, was 19 at time of the assassination and the only Dallas student at Bryn Mawr college in Pennsylvania. She vividly recalls being spat upon by other students and hollering with a professor and his family for a few days until it blew over.

The event is still very much alive for her. "It constantly comes up for me," she says. "It's hard to live and be in Dallas without it coming up. I don't understand why Dallas can't let go of it."

In essence, Mr. Pennebaker says, Dallas residents were viewed "as accomplices to the assassination rather than victims." Three-fourths of the Dallas residents he interviewed—especially those living in the city in 1963—"feel that the rest of the country still blames them for the assassination," he says.

Faced with the fear of public condemnation, Dallas chose to live for the future in the hope of living down the past. But the image lingers and has led, in the view of some, to a near-neurotic eagerness to assuage public opinion.

Dallas "was always an up-tight kind of place" even before the assassination, says Molly Ivins, the iconoclastic Dallas Times-Herald columnist. But the Kennedy slaying stripped away the city's moralistic, judgmental edge. Now, she says, Dallas "worries obsessively about what other people think."

Polishing the 'Big D'

In a bizarre way the Kennedy tragedy was a catalyst for frenetic civic activity that produced everything but catharsis. Soon after the assassination, J. Erik Jonsson, the former Dallas mayor who invited President Kennedy to Dallas, began pushing an unprecedented series of civic improvements. His "Goals for Dallas" program had a two-fold purpose: to help Dallas residents "divert their grief" and to "show the world what kind of city we really were after we'd been tarred and feathered as the city of hate."

By the time Mr. Jonsson left office in 1971, Dallas had two new reservoirs, a network of recreation centers, a downtown underground walkway system, a new library system and emergency ambulance service; plans also were well under way for a new city hall and for construction of the massive Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

The assassination also prompted the city to quickly, but quietly, desegregate its public facilities, thus heading off the riots that savaged most large American cities. Soon after the killing, seven black and seven white community leaders were selected to implement the desegregation plan. "When the assassination happened,

the leadership of the white community and the leadership of the black community knew that we would have to clean up our act, and that we would have to do it constructively," says the Rev. S.M. Wright, pastor of People's Baptist Church.

Still, in Dallas itself, the questions and self-doubt persist. Thus, while the media plunges the nation into a week of reflection, Dallas itself will let today's assassination anniversary slip by unnoticed. "It'll just be a day of personal observance," says Mayor Annette Strauss. The sole exception will be a full day of performances, videos and exhibits at the Texas Theatre, where Lee Harvey Oswald was apprehended as he watched a double feature, "Cry of Battle" and "War Is Hell." His seat, two rows from the rear, was spray-painted black by the theater's management and is periodically touched up, an accusatory black hole in a sea of red velvet.

The November cover of D Magazine, a slick monthly edited by Ms. Fitzgibbons, who was greeted so dimly in Europe in 1968, features a dark, grainy photograph of a pensive JFK and the question, "Did Dallas Kill Kennedy?" Ms. Fitzgibbons thinks not, but she also believes Dallas isn't convinced of its innocence—in large part because it won't examine the question. She believes her mother's comment is typical of a large segment of the community: "Honey, we don't talk about that."

Perhaps nothing so clearly dramatizes the city's ambivalence as its treatment of the assassination site. It took seven years before the city finally erected a memorial to the felled president in 1970—on land donated by Dallas County—not at Dealey Plaza, but two blocks away.

Neither the county nor the city makes it easy for visitors who make the grim pilgrimage. None of the maps mounted in downtown display stands mentions the assassination. The tourists frequently end up asking each other for directions. All that commemorates the shooting's site is a solitary brass plaque.

The former Texas School Book Depository—from which Mr. Oswald allegedly shot the president—is identified on tourist maps only as the Dallas County Services Building, "a fine example of the Chicago school of architecture." On the building itself, a plaque notes its "notoriety" for an event in November 1963—on the last line.

Still, tourists keep coming. They risk life and limb by standing in the middle of Elm Street, trying to place themselves on the exact spot where the motorcade was attacked, to check the sight lines. Although there are no signs outside the building to mark the sixth floor as special, the tourists know. They point to the window in the southwest corner. They invade the building itself in a vain effort to stand where the alleged assassin stood.

An unmarked guest book in the building lobby is filled with sorrowful comments, scrawled by visitors from as far afield as Europe, New Zealand and China. "Will we ever know the truth?" one visitor asked.

The attention has pressured local officials to open the sixth floor, which has been sealed for most of the past decade. "This is supposed to be a democracy," a foreign visitor wrote. "Why aren't you interpreting your own history?"

A museum, named simply 'The Sixth Floor' and originally scheduled for Nov. 22 is now planned for completion on Feb. 20, President's Day. Aside from preserving the alleged assassin's perch, most of the exhibit will use historic films, photographs, artifacts and displays to explain themes such as "The Trip to Texas," the various investigations into the assassination and its historical legacy.

But the Kennedy family has responded to The Sixth Floor with a chilling silence, while Charles Daly, director of the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston and a former Kennedy associate, has called it morbid. "I think it celebrates death when it

should be celebrating life," he explains.

No wonder the long-sought museum—like the city around it—seems to be of two minds about itself. One press release, for example, rhetorically asks, "Wouldn't it be

better just to leave the subject alone?" and responds to itself: "President Kennedy himself said that 'history is the memory of a nation.' You don't serve history by burying your past."